

S. Ganesa Iyer: A Connoisseur and Sahridaya

G. S. IYER

Ganesa Iyer of Thiruvananthapuram, connoisseur and authority on Kathakali and Kutiyattam, an acknowledged expert on Carnatic style classical music and renowned educationist best known for his outstanding and pioneering contribution to the institution of the State School Youth Festival of Kerala as the prime forum of presentation of young talent in the entire gamut of arts in the state, a true savant, passed away in his 92nd year on May 24, 2005. The Sangeet Natak Akademi had honoured him for his pathbreaking contributions to the revival of Kutiyattam during the special celebrations held in the headquarters of the Akademi in April 1995.

Ganesa Iyer was in the village of Dalavapuram about 35 kms north of Thiruvananthapuram on December 25, 1913. The closest town today is Varkala, a pilgrimage centre of traditional importance whose sanctity is augmented by being the seat of Sri Narayana Guru, the outstanding vedantin and social reformer who was perhaps the most profoundly influential individual of 20th century Kerala. Ganesa Iyer used to recall warmly the daily darshan he got of Narayana Guru as a teenager when he made his way home from school. He used to say in his old age how he was perhaps one of the few still left alive who had actually met the Guru. He used recall the Guru asking the boys their names and giving them biscuits or raisins before giving them the characteristic advice that they should study hard and learn a lot and not be ashamed of any type of labour. The catholicity of outlook married to robust conservatism and deeply felt faith that marked Ganesa Iyer all his life surely owed at least in part to the deep impressions left by the Guru on the teenager. Allied to that would be the life and works of Kumaran Asan, the noblest of modern Malayalam poets and a close disciple of Narayana Guru, who also had grown up nearby and whose writings were redolent with allusions to the area. One of Ganesa Iyer's earliest teachers in school was R. Sankar, a great pillar of Narayana Guru's movement, a venerated freedom fighter and later a distinguished Chief Minister of Kerala.

Dalavapuram owed its name to a Dalava, the designation of the Prime Ministers of Travancore till the 18th century. It goes back to Subbayyan, the Prime Minister of the great Karthika Tirunal Maharaja and an ancestor of Ganesa Iyer six generations back, who had received lands in that area as gift from the Maharaja for services rendered. However, when Ganesa Iyer was born, the family had descended to the level of middle peasants and his father actually worked the fields. Six generations can easily see the ruin of any family but Ganesa Iyer and his children always used to wonder whether their family had been fast tracked to a hand to mouth existence because the Prime Minister's two grandsons were partisans of Dalava Velu Thampi, now accepted as one of our earliest freedom heroes having



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fought the East India Company in 1811, thus losing all their official ranks and privileges. One result was that Ganesa Iyer grew up not sheltered but exposed to people in all walks of life. The family also owned the Vishwanath temple in the village and it was their proud tradition that no worshipper was ever barred entrance there even in old days way before temples in Travancore were opened to all Hindus by the famous royal proclamation of 1937.

Having completed his school education running a half marathon each way on every school day, Ganesa Iyer reached Thiruvananthapuram to get a college education. The free meals offered in the main temple sustained him but temple also exposed him to Kathakali and classical music, his true passions in life. The Padmanabhaswami temple had Kathakali performances for ten nights each during its two annual festivals in which the finest performers took part. Thus, Ganesa Iyer also became a keen student of the singing of Venkichen Bhagavathar and Aymanam Appu Bhagavathar, two of the finest artists ever to conduct a Kathakali performance. Singing in Kathakali has the sole object of assisting the dancer to perform optimally and is thus committed to total fidelity to tala and clear enunciation of the text to make it intelligible to the audience rather than elaboration of ragas. Venkichen Bhagavathar is the acknowledged creator of the current system of Kathakali singing with special accent raga alapana based on the Carnatic style of classical music. He had also changed the designated ragas for many pieces and introduced new ragas from Carnatic classical style into the repertoire. Ganesa Iyer had never taken a single lesson in music any time in his life but he acquired an ear for tala that was exquisite and uncompromising and a knowledge of ragas uncannily vast for a layman. The foundation for this formidable storehouse of taste was no doubt laid during the voluntary apprenticeship with the master singers of Kathakali music. It was this intense exposure under two highly skilled masters that introduced Ganesa Iyer to the beauties and subtleties of Carnatic classical music. He never learned music formally but he was considered good enough to be a member of the Board of the All India Radio Thiruvananthapuram for selection and grading of artists, a responsibility he carried out till he was well into his eighties. Combined with his mastery over Sanskrit and profound grasp of puranic lore, this Mathematics graduate became a favoured teacher and unofficial guide for prospective music Ph.Ds as more than a score of such 'doctors' could testify today. This combination of skills, was also an essential prerequisite for any person attempting a commentary of the compositions of Muttuswami Dikshitar. Dikshitar's compositions are replete with allusions to purana stories, legends associated with various temples as sthalapuranas and descriptions of the attributes and exploits of the divinities whose glories he sang. Ganesa Iyer was an obvious and deserving candidate of this difficult task and he did it with loving care. That text still remains unpublished and deserves to see the light of day.

The concept of the State School Youth Festival also drew Ganesa Iyer's enthusiasm as it too had the ingredients of art and music to which was added his keenness for organisation. This venture was started in a modest way in 1956 as soon as Kerala became a political reality. It was all ad hoc those days without the elaborate arrangements that mark the work of the

host city these days. Therefore it would be no surprise that, when the second round took place in Thiruvananthapuram, Ganesa Iyer landed at home with more than a dozen teen age boys and girls in tow and announced that they would stay there and compete. It occurred to none in that orthodox Brahmin household to ask which caste or religion any of the visitor belonged to. Two of the boys who slept in the verandah and ate the idlis won prizes and became famous later, former Chief Minister A.K. Antony and the noted Malayalam playback singer Jayachandran. Ganesa Iyer became a permanent fixture in the organization and conduct of the annual Youth Festivals and he stayed on to work on them every year for more than twenty years after he left the government—a rare vote of confidence indeed in an official of the government.

His apprenticeship with the great Kathakali musicians brought Ganesa Iyer into close personal contact with the great dancers of the day. Till the great poet Vallathol Narayana Menon took the initiative to establish the Kerala Kalamandalam, Kathakali survived only in temples and through the patronage of well off Namboothiri households. The maharajas of Travancore were genuine and generous patrons of arts but their interests still varied from individual ruler to another. The large Namboothiri households that sustained the art in northern Kerala were disintegrating by the 20s of the 20th century as the feudal landholding system collapsed. The entire infrastructure of sponsorship of Kathakali in the northern style was in irremediable decay. The great traditional art was saved primarily by the efforts of Vallathol who created a home for it and made it possible for the artists to teach new batches of dancers, musicians and make up artists so that their knowledge was preserved and transmitted to the delectation of the future generations. This labour produced what was surely the finest assemblage of dancing talent anywhere anytime, an 'Elizabethan' collection of talent whose mastery is recalled today by the fortunate audiences with nothing less than thrill and the deepest pleasure. Ganesa Iyer became a close friend of the greats like Chengannur Raman Pillai, Kudamaloar Karunakaran Nair, Mankulam Vishnu Namboothiri, Kurichi Kunjan Panikkar, Champakkulam Pachu Pillai and Kalamandalam Krishnan Nair, to mention only a few of the brilliant galaxy that illuminated the stage in Kerala and elsewhere. Ganesa Iyer belonged to the peculiarly Malayali set called Kalibhrantan, people who were mad about Kathakali and considered the designation a real honour and term of praise, who would walk miles and keep awake the whole night to see a performance and also analyse the finer points of the presentations with intimate knowledge of the theory and conventions of dance. He honed his understanding through detailed discussions with the dancers. He was a special fan and intimate friend of Chengannur Raman Pillai, and was one of the few who was on first name basis with him. After all, Raman Pillai was 18 years senior to him and was Asan (equivalent to master or ustad) to almost all but perhaps it was a tribute to Ganesa Iyer's profound grasp of the art of Kathakali that Guru Raman Pillai allowed such intimacy and familiarity. Once Raman Pillai performed for a college audience in Kottayam, still in his brilliant best at almost 80, and Ganesa Iyer, who was senior officer in the Education Department in

Thiruvananthapuram, travelled 150 kms to see the performance—an authentic kalibhrantan! Raman Pillai was a specialist in the rajasik kathi characters despite his small physique but Ganesa Iyer had seen him do all types, even the far different minukku of women. He was proud of having seen some performances of Raman Pillai every year without break for more than fifty years. Equally close was he to Mankulam Vishnu Namboothiri, the greatest dancer in that generation of the satvik pacha characters, who perhaps was unrivalled as Krishna.

It was almost inevitable thus Ganesa Iyer became a full time worker in the field of Kathakali after he retired from government in 1969. He was one of the founders of the Margi School in Thiruvananthapuram in the early 70s of the 20th century which has now grown into an institution comparable to the Kalamandalam as a teaching institution. Ganesa Iyer's first concern in Margi was the teaching of texts. All Kathakali texts are purana based. However, the actor is not confined to repeating with gestures what the author has written but has absolute freedom to improvise, subject to the elaboration not deviating from the basic mood of the scene and not introducing clashing rasas. Two conditions follow; the actor should have a thorough understanding of the text so that he appreciates the sthayibhava and a broader knowledge to judge what can be introduced a manodharma or imaginative additions. Ganesa Iyer's great admiration for Chengannur Raman Pillai lay precisely in the twin skills he possessed in abundance. Therefore, he took up the teaching of Kathakali texts to ensure that the students in Margi School were well grounded in them. One prerequisite for this effort, he discovered, was a thorough knowledge of Sanskrit because a substantial part of Kathakali texts was in that language. Ganesa Iyer made an intense study of Sanskrit and Sanskrit dramatic literature which led him into an altogether new area of activity eventually; but that come later. When he was nearly sixty, he read the entire text of Valmiki and Vyasa to better ground himself in the original compositions of most of the Kathakali plays to make their presentation more exact and faithful to the founding texts. This endeavour also led him to write detailed acting instructions for actors to follow in the presentation of various texts. These no doubt existed earlier too but most actors who specialised in specific roles did their own work. The Margi School also revived several texts lying half forgotten or unused which too needed such treatment. Ganesa Iyer was one of the contributors to this effort to expand the repertoire and preserve the traditions. One interesting experiment he did was to write detailed instructions for specific characters, not necessarily for presentation on stage but as guides for training. After all, it is hours practice that is reflected in minutes of stage presentation. One of the most fascinating essay on this lines done by him was on the role of Kali in Nalacharitam. Kali, the master of kaliyuga is the incarnation evil but is of divine origin, 'an archangel slightly ruined' who, like Lucifer, pursues Nala to spite the gods and the goodness that gods create and foster. Similarly, he analysed and exhaustively described the possibilities of the presentation many characters and scenes, among them Vasishta's indignation at the plans to exile Rama and the journey of Akrura, the reluctant emissary of Kamsa, to Nandagopa's village to fetch Krishna and Balabhadra to challenge Kamsa's best wrestlers, the dilemma faced by Queen Sudeshna of the Virata ruler, caught between her duty towards

the disguised Panchali and her affection for her brother Keechaka who is hellbent of possessing her.

Ganesa Iyer's study of Sanskrit introduced him to the vast dramatic literature in that language and led him to a study of Kutiyattam. This is not the context to go into details on this form of dramatic presentation Sanskrit texts but let us merely note that Kutiyattam existed only in Kerala and was limited to some acts alone of selected plays. It is a curious fact that no evidence exists about Kalidasa and Bhavabhuti being presented in Kutiyattam style while Bhasa is extensively used. The Margi School became the centre for experimentation in presenting texts not used so far and reviving several others. Ganesa Iyer was a major contributor to the efforts by composing detailed acting instructions. He noted later, "Of the twenty Sanskrit plays that were arranged and acted in Kutiyattam, thirteen were Bhasa's plays. However, out of the thirtyfive acts in these plays, only four are acted today. The other plays used were Aschryachoodamani of Shaktibhadra, Subhadradhananjayam and Tapatisamvaranam of Kulasekhara, Naganandam of Shriharsha, Mattavilasam of Mahendrapallava, Bhagadajjukiyam of Bodhayana and Kalyanasougandhikam of Nilakantha . . . and only limited portions were presented from these plays. In a courageous measure, over the past eight years, students who were trained in all the seven acts of 'Aschryachoodamani' through the constant efforts and exacting training of teachers presented the result in 118 evenings stretched over seven years. The 'mantrankam' from Bhasa was acted over 28 evenings as also the 'mayasitankam' and 'agnipraveshankam' of the same playwright— both forgotten for over a century.... Thus Margi has been able to expand Kutiyattam to 162 evenings and has presented Kutiyattam more than 300 times in the stage over the past decade, preserving its authenticity . . ." (from an article in 'Nriyakalarangam' of July 1996) Ganesa Iyer's contribution to this effort was recognised by the Sangeet Natak Akademi during its celebration of Kathakali and Kutiyattam in April 1995. He was also one of the contributors to the special issue on Kutiyattam of 'Sangeet Natak' published on that occasion.

In his approach to presentation of Kathakali and Kutiyattam, Ganesa Iyer was a conservative in the best sense of the term. His belief in the purity of tradition was complete as can be seen from his observations in the quote above. He disapproved of innovations that played to the gallery and thus clashed with the rasa that would have dominated the action. But he did not wish to freeze things as he found it. This very conservative attitude was for him a motive for reform by removing what was low and inappropriate. He brought into this endeavour a catholicity of outlook which was a hallmark of his generation. Witness his campaign on the presentation of yavanas in 'Ambarishacharitam' a play composed by Prince Ashwati Tirunal in the 18th century. The story tells of Ambarisha fighting yavanas and the customary arrangement was to dress the yavana chief and his two companions as moplals. Ganesa Iyer wrote; "From the poet's description, it only follows that the yavanas are obsessed with worldly pleasures and without a thought for the hereafter. They are described as people who jeer at Vishnu but the current style of presenting them as a thangal and his companions is

entirely inappropriate. It is indeed a major fault that a fraternal community is insulted in this way. Further, Islam came into being around 1400 years back while Ambarisha was a ruler of the Kṛta era when Islamic rituals were obviously not practiced. Imagining the presence of Muslims in that era and to present their activities in a comic manner on the Kathakali stage is illogical and utterly improper. There are allusions to yavanas in the 'Mahabharata'. It would far more appropriate if the yavana commander is dressed like Kali and his companions like messengers with a black dress. This would be in consonance with the Kathakali ethos and would avoid insults to followers of other faiths . . . the goudi style in the verses of the scene make it amply clear that yavanas are conceived by the poet as tamasik characters and it is a sad fact that the scene is acted in a style entirely alien to the intentions of the poet." (from an article in 'Nrittakalarangam' of July 1983). This passage is a fine illustration of his approach basing his criticism on the need for Kathakali to be faithful to the puranic traditions and preserving the suprahuman qualities of its characters to maintain its authenticity. It was this principle that lay as the leitmotif of all his studies and writings.

Ganesa Iyer wrote voluminously on presentation of plays and characters in both Kathakali and Kutiyattam. This assessment of his labours would not be complete without offering a sample. The writer chooses his essay on Chengannur Raman Pillai because it brings out what he cherished most in Kathakali and his interest in stage presentation of characters as the vital ingredient of that form of drama and, most important of all, because it is a tribute paid by a great connoisseur to one of the greatest actors.

SOME SPECIAL FEATURES OF GURU CHENGANNUR RAMAN PILLAI'S PERFORMANCES

[Chengannur Raman Pillai was born in 1885 and performed on the stage in an extraordinarily long career lasting till he was 92. Even then he decided to retire because he felt that a cataract surgery in one eye was diminishing the quality of expression of his eyes rather than because of debilities relating to old age. A short man with relatively small eyes for an actor, he overcame these handicaps with rigorous training which made his movements in consonance with tala perfect and his stage presence dominating. He was considered incomparable in his expression of rasas and precision of his gestures. Though he specialized in the rajasik kathi roles as he grew older, he had done the entire range of satvik pachas and other specialized roles like Hanuman and Hamsam with considerable success. What follows is a tribute paid to Guru Raman Pillai by Ganesa Iyer after his death in 1982 at the age of 97. The original in Malayalam has been slightly expanded in places to explain dramatic contexts in greater detail.

The most useful reference book on puranic stories is the *Puranic Encyclopaedia* of Shri Vettam Mani.]

Chengannur Raman Pillai was most famous as an outstanding kurumkathi but I had the good fortune of watching that great actor perform a remarkable variety of roles from that of Rukmini. His first role ever on stage, all the way to Narakasura he performed in the 70s in Thiruvananthapuram, in a distinguished career spanning nearly eight decades. Further, I was able to observe the distinguishing characteristics of his performances in various roles during half a century of watching his performances with no year passing by without my attending at least a few plays in which he acted. I had the pleasure of enjoying his performances as Nala, hamsam and Bahuka (Nala in disguise as the disfigured charioteer of king Rituparna) in 'Nalacharitam', Dharmaputra in 'Kirmiravadham', Bhima and Hanuman in 'Kalyanasougandhikam', Arjuna in 'Kalakeyavadham', Balabhadra in 'Subhadraharanam', the yavana companion in 'Ambarishacharitam', Daksha in 'Dakshayagam', Vasishtha in 'Harischandracharitam' Bhima in 'Duryodhanavadham', Jarasandha in 'Rajasuyam', the 'little' Narakasura in 'Narakasuravadham' Ravana in 'Balivijayam' and 'Toranayuddham' Shishupala in 'Rukminiswayamvaram' Ghatotkacha in 'Sundariswayamvaram', Vrshaparva in 'Devayanicharitam' Ravana in 'Ravanavijayam' and 'Kartaviryavijayam' Keechaka in 'Keechakavadham' Duryodhana in 'Uttaraswayamvaram' and 'Duryodhanavadham', Shurapadma in 'Shurapadmasuravadham' Meghanada in 'Meghanadavadham' Bana in 'Banayuddham', Mahabali in 'Palazhimathanam' Kamsa in 'Pootanamoksham' and 'Kamsavadham'. He took exceptional care to dance with total fidelity to the nature of the characters to be portrayed after an exact study of the story and a careful analysis of the various contexts in which the character appears and his interaction with the other characters on the stage. His presentation was invariably dignified, projecting the nobility of characters in a powerful manner; he never attempted humour or comedy aimed solely at amusing the audiences and getting an easy nod of approval from the gallery. Now I will briefly touch upon the salient features of his presentation of some important roles.

'Nalacharitam: Third Day', the third section of the play composed by Unnayi Varier to be danced over four nights, takes the story of Nala forward from the point where he loses his kingdom in a dice game and abandons his wife in the forest to roam the wilds, his mind addled and depressed. He saves the great serpent Karkotaka from a forest fire and the serpent bites him as soon as he is out of danger, transforming the handsome king into a misshapen and ugly creature. Raman Pillai acts the scene with the sthayibhava of adbhuta at the unexpected response of Karkotaka to the aid rendered with sorrow for the revulsion generated by the changes in his body as only the subordinate mood. He then travels to Ayodhya, the capital of Rituparnaso that he can serve him as charioteer, using his peerless skills while biding his time to free himself of Kali whose evil presence has invested him. Raman Pillai danced the process of this expedition of Nala transformed into Bahuka, the charioteer, beginning with the description of the burned out forest, the jungle of shrubs that he reaches next and then the human settlements. Here he describes the people engaged in studies and sacred rituals and the forces of the king consisting of elephants, cavalry, chariots and infantry, with special observations on the quality and deficiencies of the horses. This presentation forms a careful

preparation of background for Bahuka's meeting with the king.

'Nalacharitam: First Day' tells the story of Nala and Damayanti falling inlove through the mediation of Hamsam, the divine saurus crane, and the test imposed on the lovers by the gods who impose on Nala the responsibility of taking a message from them to Damayanti that she is expected to choose one of the gods in the impending swayamvara. Nala enters the inner quarters of the palace, torn between his love and his pledge to be a faithful emissary. This terrible inner conflict of Nala is depicted with rare intensity by Unnayi Varier in famous dandakam, a verse composed in an extra long metre. Raman Pillai invariably danced the entire dandakam to bring out the tensions in Nala 'a solace to his eyes, he saw Damayanti' and 'the gods' messenger controlled his mind, aware of all that made that a sin' strictly eschewing srngara which would have been inappropriate for a loyal messenger.

In his younger days Raman Pillai had performed in the same play the role of the Hamsa, the golden saurus crane caught by Nala in his garden and released in pity at his lamentation. The bird offers to express his gratitude by visiting Damayanti and telling her about Nala's virtues in a manner that would make her fall in love with him. He does so and returns to report to the king, 'I have joined your mind with Bhaimi's; it won't waver even if Indra tries, so what chance have all else, O king?' Damayanti chasing the golden bird who leads her away from her companions so that he could talk to her confidentially about Nala (a scene made famous by Raja Ravi Varma in a painting later) is one of the most delectable scenes in Kathakali. Raman Pillai presented the bird messenger as a dignified advisor to Damayanti with no light or flippant interludes stylised in the highest tradition of Kathakali without gimmicks resorted to by others like drawing the picture of Nala to impress the princess and various other antics. Raman Pillai's performance of the lines about the bird living in Nala's capital city so that the city beauties could learn to walk from him was celebrated.

'Nalacharitam: Second Day' deals with Nala playing a dice game with his impoverished and warped brother Pushkara and losing everything under Kali's evil influence to be exiled with only the cloth around his waist and with his wife as his sole companion. The play opens with the famous love scene that was danced by Raman Pillai in its entirety. Then comes Pushkara's unexpected challenge to which Nala responds with annoyance laced with disapproval with a touch of contempt flashing intermittently. When Nala loses the dice game he abandons his crown and treasure with the calm of a person redeeming a pledge with any expression misery or deprivation at being cheated.

Yudhishtira in 'Kirmiravadham' is a dhirashanta hero who conveys his deep sorrow at the sight of the tired, dust-covered and weather-beaten Panchali in a controlled and restrained manner. When Krishna summons the charka and offers to eliminate the Kauravas, he pleads for his wicked cousins, still his kin despite their evil nature. The presentation is infused with charity and fairness. The same sentiment dominates his plea to Durvasas, the angry muni who is prepared to curse the Kauravas and turn them into a pile of ashes.

'Kalyanasougandhikam' presents the first face to face encounter of Hanuman and Bhima who had reached the forests of the Himalayas in search of the rare flowers with which to

decorate Panchali's lovely locks and runs into his famous sibling. Hanuman's yoga is disturbed by his noisy progress. Changing himself into an aged and frail monkey, Hanuman asks Bhima to move his tail out of the path and proceed on his way and reveals himself in his glorious dimensions when Bhima fails in this apparently simple task. Aware of his immediate mission as well as his larger mission in the inevitable war, Hanuman gives his brother morale-boosting blessings Raman Pillai depicted Hanuman losing his concentration by acting out the possible reasons like mountains starting fly again and fighting each other or the oceans exceeding their prescribed limits to inundate the lands. He then observes trees toppling over followed by a heroic figure emerging and quickly recognizes him. The expression of love and affection manifested in Hanuman's face at that point remains the dominant emotion for the entire action till Bhima takes leave of him. While taking Bhima's role, Raman Pillai described the dense forest and its ferocious denizens. After the revelation of the fragile monkey as his venerable brother Raman Pillai's Bhima maintained respect and adoration for that incomparable hero as the *sthayibhava* in another example of the dignity of his interpretations and avoidance of the meretricious and the gimmicky. The attention and the admiration with which he listens to Hanuman's narration of his exploits amply covers the embarrassment experienced by his failure to move the tail of the fragile monkey and preserves the *dhirodatta* nature of Bhima without dilution.

In 'Kalakeyavadham', Arjuna is summoned to swarga to fight the enemies of his father Indra. It was after the victorious conclusion of the war that Urvashi falls in love with Arjuna who rejects her advances and is cursed to become neutered for one year—a curse that comes to Arjuna's aid for the duration of the Pandavas' sojourn in disguise in the Virata court. The play opens with Matali, Indra's charioteer, extolling Arjuna's skills and conveying the invitation to the Pandava prince to go to swarga to fight. Arjuna's famous response "Salajjoham. . ." is protest in modesty and was danced by Raman Pillai with no expression of bashfulness or that he was undeserving of praise but with sense of not being intoxicated by the praise and a *manodharma* description of the glories of swarga done in a mood of piety and ardour and joy at his good fortune in going to swarga while alive. Raman Pillai described Arjuna's arrival in swarga by telling the audience about the wish fulfilling *kalpataru*, Ganga's descent from the skies for the benefit of humanity, Airavata, the elephant Indra rode, recalling to Arjuna the story of the churning of the Milk Ocean, *Uchchaisravas*, Indra's steed, recalling to Arjuna the episode of the enslavement of Garuda's mother Vinata and the devotion and courage of the son in freeing her from bondage. Raman Pillai elaborated these events exquisitely. When Urvashi approaches Arjuna lovelorn, Raman Pillai's Arjuna rejects her as a man with total control over his senses, a person unwavering in his idea of dharma. Urvashi curses him but Arjuna's response is dominated not by despair but a sense of satisfaction that he did not betray his moral principles.

Jarasandha is an important *kathi* or *rajasik* character, in 'Rajasuyam' composed by Kartika Thirunal Maharaja of Travancore. Jarasandha was a powerful ruler whose repeated forays had forced Krishna to abandon Mathura and migrate to Dwaraka. Eventually Krishna has his

revenge when he returns to Jarasandha's capital Girivraja with Bhima and Arjuna, all in the guise of Brahmins, and gets Bhima to fight him and break him into two. Raman Pillai presented Jarasandha in the initial love scene enjoying himself with elaborate appreciation of the beauty of his queen when a terrible sound assails his ears. He wonders whether the vast drum in Girivraja's fort is smashed or whether the mountains are fighting or oceans are overflowing into the land when he sees three persons climbing over the fortress wall. Surprised and suspicious that three Brahmins are making such an unorthodox entry, he stands up to salute them (without an even a flicker of reverence due to Brahmins from the king in his face) and invites them to be seated (to his left rather than the correct and proper right). His words of welcome are delivered with wariness and a touch of sarcasm as he notices their kshatriya features like the mark of the bowstring on Arjuna's arm and the massive physique of Bhima. Arjuna's excuse that the mark came from grinding sandalpaste and Bhima's explanation that his musculature developed from exhausting work in the kitchen are dismissed with derision. He asks Bhima whether he ate all the food he prepared leaving nothing for the others. Then he turns to Krishna to enquire whether they had met. Was it in Mathura where he had gone to attack the city no less than eighteen times and confronted Krishna and Balabhadra who finally withdrew from that city and went far away. So effectively did he play this part that no response Krishna can blunt the sneering confidence and knowing sarcasm with which Jarasandha dominated the scene. Then he explains why he is so suspicious by recalling the deception practiced by Vishnu on Mahabali and repeatedly asks them to assure him that they surely are Brahmins. When they give this assurance again and again he offers them their wish. It is then that the disguised Krishna confesses to their true identities and the Brahmins withdraw and the princes make their entry on the stage. Raman Pillai's expression of derision and indignation at the falsity of speech and aspect of his visitors is projected with great power and with no diminution from Jarasandha's dignity, self confidence and nobility. The contempt and derision stay as dominant emotions even when he is torn into two and revives and is finally dispatched by Bhima. There is no compromise on his sense of indignation and betrayal and consequent contempt for his foes.

In 'Ravanodbhavam', the long presentation of Ravana's meditation is rivetting to any audience. Ravana has conducted extremely severe austerities surrounding himself with five fires with no expectation that Brahma would appear in response to his labours. He realizes that an extraordinary sacrifice is called for. Raman Pillai would present the preparations of sacrificial fire with firewood and ghee in plenty and examines his ten heads only to choose the saddest looking of them to be cut and offered to the fire. The ferocity of commitment would scare any audience. As the heads are offered to the fire one by one the raudra rasa intensifies on Ravana's face and he even seizes two of his heads with two hands to throw them into the fire in one violent movement. Still no brahma. Ravana wonders whether he should suspend his austerities and travel the world to propagate the futility of propitiating Brahma and end the worship of the Creating god in the world. He turns around to catch sight of one skull which displays his fate clearly—he is to die at the hands of a human. Ravana

reacts to this prediction with contempt. He looks up and sees the devas gathered lining the sky and he imagines that they are there to witness and enjoy his discomfiture. He warns them against any such expectation. He raises his sword to cut off the last of his heads, repeatedly pushes away the invisible hand that grabs him and when this happens three times he arrogantly concludes that his wishes are to be realised at last and he proceeds to make one demand after another and gets them agreed to, doing everything with an air of careless self confidence proud and uncaring about even the boon giving god.

Bana of 'Banayuddham', the son of Mahabali, who has propitiated Shiva and received the blessing that he is treated as a son of Parvati utilises the boon to make Shiva himself the custodian of his fortress capital. Later, his daughter Usha falls in love with a most handsome youth seen in her dreams whom her confidential companion Chitrlekha identifies as Aniruddha, the grandson of Krishna and fetches through her magic to be introduced into the chamber of the princess as her secret lover. His abrupt disappearance arouses the fury of Krishna and his family and they invest Bana's city and rescue the prince who marries his sweetheart. Raman Pillai's Bana makes his appearance seated, brimful of *vira rasa*, acting out the history of his austerities that achieved for him the status of a son of Shiva, Shonitapura, the birthplace of Subrahmanya, becoming his seat, his drumming during Shiva's cosmic dance pleasing the god so much that he accepted the plea to be the custodian of Bana's fortress capital. Bana has no means of finding a sparring partner and toys with the idea of fighting Shiva himself. He sees the god seated with his family and entourage around him. He challenges Ganesh and Subrahmanya both of whom decline but he confronts one of the spirit companion of Shiva and propitiates him with blood from his own finger. The rasas that manifest themselves on Bana's face on seeing Shiva are *adbhuta* and *hasya* as he imagines the god hard put to contain his domestic quarrels involving the antagonistic mounts of his family, the lion, the bull, the mouse, the peacock and the serpents on the god's body. *Vira rasa* dominates with others being subordinate.

In 'Toranayuddham' the central theme is Hanuman's exploits in Lanka. But Ravana who gets himself up magnificently to attract Sita is an important character in the play. Raman Pillai's Ravana, a *rajasik kathi*, yet appears an embodiment of *sringara* with stress on his feeling of separation from Sita. As he walks through the garden where Sita is confined, he feels unbearable heat. He asks the moon to roam the skies freely but implies how he misses the moon that is Sita's face; the blue lotuses bloom but he misses the loveliness of Sita's eyes as she sits with eyes firmly shut; the koels sing as they please but they suggest the deprivation of Sita's sweet voice. His contempt for Rama is suffused with *hasya* but it changes to *bhakti* when he offers dresses and ornaments to Sita and moves on to an incomparable expression of *sringara* as he pleads with her Sita's response asking that she be sent back to her husband changes his mood to *raudra*, rising in intensity as Sita articulates her rejection of Ravana and asserts her constancy to Rama. When she declares that he would surely meet with his death at Rama's hands he reveals his *damshttra* teeth and demands his sword. His anger collapses in shame and despair only when Mandodari holds him by the

hand and takes him away.

Keechaka in 'Keechakavadham' is Virata's brother in law and commander in chief whose prowess is an important element in the king's ability to protect his kingdom. Pandavas end up there to spend their year in disguise and Panchali is the companion of queen Sudeshna, Keechaka's sister. Panchali takes the reasonable precaution against undesirable advances by telling the queen that she has a gandharva husband who will wreak terrible vengeance on anybody behaving badly with her. Keechaka puts pressure on his sister to ensure that his desire is fulfilled. The queen escapes her dilemma by pleading both parties to be reasonable, a stand that ultimately benefits the powerful Keechaka. Panchali's report to Bhima brings him to the rendezvous and he despatches the villain. The event has its deleterious consequence as the death of the immensely strong Keechaka points to the almost inevitable conclusion that Bhima was present at the scene and almost exposes the Pandavas before the expiry of one year's life in disguise.

Raman Pillai's Keechaka is not merely after casual sexual gratification. He possesses heroic qualities and his passion for the queen's companion is part of his seigniorial privileges. The narration in the 'Mahabharata' is followed exactly by him in the death scene. The epic states that Keechaka seizes Panchali by her dress, falls down when she pushes him and gets up to chase her and tries to kick her when a spirit does him to death. Even in the death scene Raman Pillai ensured that the dominant rasa was *srngara* and the death agony and the accompanying anger were subordinate. He avoided actions like kicking and beating Panchali or vomiting blood by Keechaka in his death throes which introduced an inappropriate *bibhatsa* rasa at the moment of comeuppance for the bad lover and compromised the main rasa.

His Ravana in 'Balivijayam' never abases himself before the simian king who had humiliated him by tying him up with his tail. Raman Pillai's Ravana narrates his exploits like lifting the Kailasa and the story of Parvati's separation before he entangles himself with Bali in an expression of Ravana's indomitable spirit. Bali's massive physique awes and stuns him but he never flinches or attempts to run away. When freed from Bali's tail he is embarrassed but he never abandons his attitude of being equal to Bali in valour, pedigree and exploits at arms.

In 'Ravanavijayam', the kaleidoscope of emotions that shift rapidly from prideful vanity at the conquest of Kunbera, the arrogance in ordering Kailasa itself to move, courage and selfconfidence as he lifts the mountain, and the unbearable pain when his arms are crushed by the mountain were depicted with rapidity and brilliance by Raman Pillai. The pain and misery are instantly transformed into fulfillment and total faith in himself as soon as he receives the sword *chandrasasa* from Shiva—the gamut of emotions clearly and succinctly bringing out the qualities and characteristics of Ravana.

As Balabhadra in 'Subhadraharanam', Raman Pillai makes his entrance suffused with fury about the abduction of his beloved sister as described by the sloka announcing his entrance—'ready to incinerate the three worlds with his ire'—thus fully abiding by the principle that the last words of the verse determines the dominant rasa. Raman Pillai accepted the system of Balabhadra recapitulating events and hearing of the abduction from some Brah-

mins, a procedure that loses the taut drama of the situation and fails to convey its urgency. His Balabhadra also avoids slights to Arjuna which would be no credit that master teacher so sure of his skills and would have diminished Arjuna and Balabhadra when consent is given for the marriage. His Balabhadra fills the stage as an embodiment of valour, pride in his family and affection for his sister. As Krishna's persuasive words soften him, his fury is transformed into affection for Arjuna that is also conveyed exactly by Raman Pillai.

Raman Pillai presented Vasishta in 'Harischandracharitam' as a steadfast personage unmoved by outrageous fortune. Neither the jeers of Vishwamitra nor the insults resentment and disrespect shown by the rulers break his will. And resolve. His vow that he would enter Indra's court carrying a pot of liquor on his head if he loses his bet is made with the same firmness and without the slightest inner twinge of doubt about the possibility of failure.

The yavana companion in 'Ambarishacharitam' is a vastly different character but Raman Pillai was equally effective there too. His role done in the company of another great actor, Kavalappara Narayanan Nair, was unforgettable as they showed how the yavanas did training in martial arts and conducted physical exercises to the delight audiences.

Daksha in 'Dakshayagam' and Bhima in 'Duryodhanavadham', the most popular of all Kathakali plays, were two the most famous presentations of Raman Pillai. Both the characters are basically satvik pachas but their roles demanded a high infusion of raudra rasa. Raman Pillai had a small physique, eyes that would be considered too small for effective expression and an unremarkable nose but all these handicaps were overcome by him through the sheer precision tala acquired by him through devoted practice, fidelity to characterisation through study and analysis. His stand as Bhima behind the half raised curtain observing Dushshasana approaching and challenging him to combat, his eyes aflame with fury was ever a nerve-tingling experience for any audience. His articulation of the war cry, sharp, clear and well-pitched was unequalled. Though it is imagined that Narasimha invests Bhima during the moment of Dushshasana's death, Raman Pillai never demonstrated this transformation on the stage because such a pause and diversion would have detract from the dramatic tension of the ongoing action. He also avoided props like strings and clothes in the scene where Bhima tears apart the Chest of his foe and drinks his blood because such displays and actions like Bhima chewing the intestines would have introduced an uncalled for bibhatsa to dilute the dominant raudra of the scene. In a similar vein, the presentation of the satvik Daksha transformed into an enemy of Shiva and he perceives slights from his son in law culminating with his eviction his own daughter from the yaga and facing Shiva's troops all alone in total confidence when his forces have been routed has found a permanent place in the hearts of the rasikas.

The scrupulous care taken by Raman Pillai in eschewing the low brow can be seen even the depiction of the forester in 'Nalacharitam: Second Day'. Damayanti, abandoned by her husband, wanders in the forest and is caught by a snake. A forester saves her by killing the snake and then invites her to live with him and be his love. There is no cheap comedy or gestures when Raman Pillai takes this role but only an offer to protect a lovely woman who

has no refuge. He explains how he will provide for her—“a house with no leaks and walls all around” he makes clear—and points out how they suit each other, another example of the dignity that he invested upon every character he portrayed.

Vrshaparvan in ‘Devayanicharitam’ was another masterly presentation of Raman Pillai. The asura ruler is the father of Sharmishtha whose troubled relationship with Devayani, the daughter of her father’s guru Shukra, and the marriage of both the women to Yayati is one of the most famous stories of Indian puranic lore. Raman Pillai moves from *sringara* in the traditional opening scene with his wife to *vira rasa* in the next scene. In response to his brother’s salutation, he describes at length the great deeds of Mahabali, the asura ruler who was the noblest and the most virtuous of all rulers of the earth before Vishnu cheated him and turned power over to Indra and expelled Mahabali to the nether world of Sutala. Vrshaparvan decides to avenge Mahabali and then follow entertaining scenes of war preparations, defeat of Indra, confiscation of the riches of *swarga* and the humiliation of Indra’s elephant Airavata. Vrshaparvan treats Indra with contempt and disgust and reminds him of his misbehaviour with Ahalya. The entire scene fully displays *vira rasa* in all its intensity. (Regrettably, this brilliant episode is almost forgotten today and the story is confined to the part dealing with Devayani’s love for Kacha.) A similar treatment of *vira rasa* could be found in the depiction of Mahabali in ‘Palazhimathanam’ too.

In the words of poet Ulloor Parameswara Iyer in his ‘Premasngeetam’, this noble soul was designated “a member of the dancing troupe of humans by the Master of Universal Dance”, not a mere member to fill the scene but a leading player who danced to the delight of the world and gave joy to many generations before withdrawing behind the curtain of the stage of this universe. His sustained and incomparable service to art spanning eighty years had a rare perfection and I pray for eternal peace to that noble soul.